

Fortnightly Sermon

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AT PEACE WITH THINGS

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AT PEACE WITH THINGS.

"May this be a day of blessings to you — sweet content with what is."

"Thanks to the human heart by which we live, thanks to its tenderness, its joys and fears." These words come to my mind on rising to speak to you, because I cannot look on you without emotions of wonder, of joy, of fear, of humility. Neither can I fail to gather much strength and hope from your faces, albeit I understand and feel deeply how pathetic and how humbling the fact is that people come to listen to the preacher week by week. And yet I have learned long ago that a friend may be scripture to us and speak scripture to us; yea, in the faces of some friends do I read scripture written in golden light, and in their words, their warnings, their tidings of affection, I find poems and scriptures as glorious as the songs of the morning stars. To-day I will take even a text from a friend's mouth, as from Scripture. One wrote to me not long ago, "May this be a day of blessings to you—sweet content with what is." I paused with reverence over the benediction. It were enough if it had been "May this be a day of blessings to you." Then would have come trooping to my mind all the possible blessings of a day, which, as old George Herbert said, "hang in clusters, they come trooping upon us, they break forth like mighty waters on every side." I should have thought, mayhap, of the things that make a day happy, of what we call successes or pleasures. But there followed these words instantly, "*sweet content with what is,*" as the sum of a day of blessings. This indeed contained so deep and so blissful a thought, that I could not but follow it, and found it scripture to my soul. In the spirit of this saying I shall speak to you to-day of being at peace with things; and I shall aim to give you reasons why we should be at peace with things,

for I find myself greatly helped by seeing the reason for any good action or right spirit, and the unreasonableness of the opposites of them. For though I may answer correctly when good precepts are urged on me, or when they seem to cry aloud to me, in this general way, I find often that this is no sure armor when the combat comes and the strife has me in its grasp, but is lost in the exigency or emotion. The precept comes not to hand to help me at this critical point, because it has not become a part of thought, a part of *thought* I say, but is only my own unheeding assent to a common currency of sentiment. Thus, it is easy to say we ought to be at peace with things; but when the trouble presses, what then? what becomes of the saying? The mere precept falls out of sight; it avails not, because we have not made it the substance of our thinking, so as to see how reasonable it is, and how unreasonable not to be peace with things. The world is full of the discords and the troubles, the complaints, the sighs which come of not having wrought this peace into the fibres of our thoughts. The poor continually are sighing for the middle estate, so that a great deal of strength and time goes into sighing which should go into earning. And the middle estate envies the power of the very rich, and feels as poor as the poorest. And the very rich, what are they doing meantime, but longing and sighing and often groaning with the cares, which their easy but not wealthy neighbors never feel, yet seem to cry aloud to suffer. Therefore it is wise and useful to give a principle which may become thought within us, and show us *why it is so reasonable* to be at peace with things.

Now I have observed this,—I say it is a matter of observation,—that when we are not at peace with things, but at war, we are going about not looking at the whole of our lot, but only at some things in it; and these things we compare enviously with some things in the lots of others. But consider how unreasonable this is. Against which unreasonableness, this is the principle I offer, namely, that we must take our lot as a whole; and so taken, we never would exchange it for any other, because always we shall find some one thing at least too precious to be parted with. And if we have some one thing so precious that we would not part with it for anything, what is that but having our lot very precious indeed therewith? Is it not foolish to

think of taking the best things out of many lots, one thing out of this condition, another out of that situation, and so, keeping all our own delights too, thereupon grumbling because we cannot have this artificial compound made up by us as a workmen mixes stuffs? We must take our lot as it comes to us. And how comes it to us? Emerging from the multitude of conditions around us and far back of us, which are divine. From these it emerges holy, God-made. And would we change it for any other? No, because we have something in it that we would not give up. Then if it be unnatural to make a human lot by striving to piece together the best things out of all other lots about us, and if it be natural and reasonable to take our lot all as one thing, as it comes forth from God's hand, and if, so taken, we would not change it for any other, why, then how foolish and childish it is to grumble at this lot, which, nevertheless, we would not part with if we could.

Every one of us can think easily of things he would not part with for all other things of the great rich earth put together. It may be a wife or husband, whose daily strength and cheer compass us, and take up, as in a skilled and strong hand, the very hardness of some of our conditions, like a flint, whereon then with their hearts they strike sparks forth, which either light the darkness or kindle a fire whereat we may warm ourselves. It may be some precious companionship of mind or heart or soul, which may pack every day with rich experiences, with knowledge of life, because life abounds so in that union, with glowing thoughts or radiant expression; and these things freight memory for a life-voyage with great sustenance, and we never can be hungry unto utter pain or weakness. Or it may be perhaps dear children, whose daily sweetness nobody knows but us, the daily observers. And how precious and lovely it is to be daily observers of these little lives that are ours to cherish, the precious first-born to young parents mayhap, or the lovely last-born to the old, or the group of midway younglings who fill your house with a gaiety which is like birds in a grove, in whose music your own springtime comes again, better even than it was in your own early years. Or the son whose manly worth is a proud joy to you; or the daughter whose grace is like willows over graves, so beautiful and such message of comfort it is! Or it

may be a brother or sister or father or mother, or friend. Nay, it may be but the work you are doing day by day, doing nobly, doing secretly mayhap; and all the more wondrous comfort and preciousness may lie in it if it be known only to a few who thank us for it with all their souls. Nay, it may not even be any of these things, but only a memory of them all, or of some of them; that kind of memory in which a delicious companionship we once had is immortal; memories of little men-children or women-children who slid off our breasts, too narrow for them, to the wide earth and the heavens, but off of our breasts deep as those heavens with memory and love. Nay, I can conceive of a look, of an expression on some face, when it is not known we are observing it, of a hand-touch, of a depth in the eyes, which, having once had or seen we would not exchange for "the wealth of seas and the spoils of war." Now if every one can think easily of such-like things in his lot, mayhap of some one thing only which he would not part with for all other things together, think for an instant what a fact that is! Is it not a thing of deep moment, of wonder, of divinity, that every one has something he would not exchange for all other things? Surely this is something to fasten on. So long as the mind dwells on this, there will be no moment for repining. And is it not reasonable, I say, to dwell most and longest on that possession which is worth more than all the world to us, which we would not think of bartering for all the best things together that all the other persons have? Surely this is very reasonable, as it is also very simple. And yet it is the secret of the happy and grateful spirit which is at peace with things.

This oneness of our lot, whereby it must be taken all parts together as a unit, is a fact that reaches far back into past generations, nay, into a past which sinks in itself until it is lost and even Time seems gone. We could not change one portion of our lot, and leave another as it is, without altering conditions back into so shadowy a realm that truly we should know not where we were,—without changing the order of things. "It takes all mankind to make a man," a poet says, "and each man when he dies takes a whole earth away with him." When the child in your arms smiles, the little flexible mouth and the eyelids, the dimpled cheeks, move just as they do, and not

otherwise, by causes which run back out of sight until they are lost in God; and when two little children smile, the expressions are as different as the past conditions from which they have come so mysteriously. Away, far beyond all reckoning and all imaginings, you began to be made. In what did you begin? What was the first forecast of you? Truly, when I ask this question I am led much more to wonder whether I began at all. What kind of creatures, plants, passions, thoughts, then flourished on this earth, when, if ever, I began, when the something that was to bloom in me took its beatific life? Nay, where indeed was the earth perhaps? You must have begun in it in some way when it was yet "without form and void." Something there was which was the prediction of you. What forms and progressions led to you, what myriads of conspiring atoms worked together when your features began to be foretold far back? And a like multitude of forces and atoms toiled together through aeons of ages to the making of all other persons who came near to any one of the long line of human beings from whom you have come, or any other person who has touched your own life in the present. All sprung out of that same unfathomable depth, and all have joined together to make your lot what it is. I wonder not that John Weiss said that the most religious thing in the universe is any *fact* whatever. Thus we are obliged to look at our lot as one whole, because such an infinity of causes has worked together to make it; yea, an infinity of causes has worked on every little part of it, and the simplest thing in our lot would be a little different if even one of this multitude had been absent or had been changed. Now to look so at our lot as a whole, what is it but to regard it as we do any natural product, a flower, a tree, a mountain? We may find some flaw in each of these if we look with an eye seeking flaws, which is a very bad kind of an eye; we may see flaws in any natural thing, I say, whereby it falls short of the ideal of its shape or structure. But we look at the object all as one, and call it beautiful and grand, and take it thankfully, knowing that the conditions which have turned its parts this way or that way are immeasurable and hidden in Nature's store-house, which is the same as to say in the bosom of the life of God. In a like way we must think of our lot as a natural product, whose conditions and formation we cannot

fathom. And if we find it, thus taken all as one, too precious to be exchanged, it is foolish and ungrateful and impious to complain of a lot which we would not barter if we could for any other that ever we have seen; and, if we look, it seems to be like a feature in the countenance of God.

"Gentle pilgrim, if thou know
The garment old of Pan,
And how the hills began,
The frank blessings of the hill
Fall on thee—as fall they will."

Now when nature thus has laid out our fate and lot, prepared during countless ages of the workings of countless forces, then we see at once that our own will comes into play. It makes a great difference how we act on the circumstances which this far-working Providence has brought around us. Let us look at this.

We see in our lot bright things and dark things. The dark things are those which we shall complain of unless we take thought to be reasonable. The bright things include those which are too precious to allow the thought of exchanging them. What shall we do if we be wise and reasonable? How shall we act on this lot of ours? My answer is,—We shall be careful to look mainly at the brightness, at the bright things. If we do that, we shall get a great supply of light by which we can see our way in the world. It is very strange that we who need a lamp for our feet through all the wondrous, strange, complex ways of life, nevertheless put away the bright things which will shed light for us, and look at the dark things. And still more, if we look at bright things they give understanding how to look reasonably and patiently on the darker things; for not only have these bright things a light to show us how to walk our path, but they show us the dark things in that path in such a way that we can understand better why they shine not, and the light leads to comprehension of the shadows. Especially we should look long and lovingly on those bright things which are so precious and dear as to be prized above all possessions and wealth, dearer to us than all other things together. Why should we look for the bad when the good is by us? And why look most on aught but the best? If we have a

picture in which a rare genius and rich knowledge of life have joined feeling and fancy, shall we be blind to this because some parts are out in the drawing? Once I stood looking, rapt, at a marvelous piece of sculpture, as it seemed to me, an old man, who looked out wonderingly, with the simple pathos of wonder, into a great distance, which seemed to have become a distance and marvel to him while he was asleep,—familiar and close at hand before. There was to my mind an exquisite tenderness, patience, pathos and wonder in the old face, in the raised hand, in all the attitude, at once so feeble and yet so strong. And as I stood admiring it, a friend at my side said, having been speechless all the time before, “Don’t you think that fore-arm is a little too long?” I confess my heart sank within me a little, for I would fain not have had my own attention directed to bad, when good was by me so beautifully. If we have a gem of gleaming lustre, shall we fill our eyes with flaws in it? If there are dear faces in which souls shine, in which life’s central mysteries send waves of feeling back and forth twixt the heart and the margins, the mouth, the eyes, who will stop before such beauty to pick out a mole in the features? Even so it is wise to look at our fortunes, holding our eyes on the inestimable things, which no one could buy from us with all the wealth of worlds; for thus we shall keep at peace with all things among which are such precious things.

But again, I say the dark things in our lot either are in our power or are not in our power. It is familiar to you, from my long preaching to you, that I draw a great deal of help from the old distinction of the Stoics, that all things are of two classes, the things which are in our power and the things which are not in our power. Now the dark things are either in our power or not, that is, if they continue to exist, or if they remain dark, it is either our own fault, or else it is beyond our power. Well, if the things we complain of are in our power, then is it not foolish to repine? For we have simply to change and cure them, being powerful over them. Before we complain indeed, it will be well to ask very closely whether the evils be not in our power to be cured, and come not by our own fault; for we shall be surprised at the many ills which prove to be of our own making if we study them well. Many persons go through life complain-

ing of troubles which are but their own ignorance or idleness or envy or wastefulness or ill manners, or ingratitude or heedlessness, transformed to plague them, like flies breeding in decay; and they will not clear away the breeding heaps. There are hopeless ills, I know (I think I hear some of you saying this to me),—there are ills which once done *cannot* be healed. Yes, they are sad ills, the most woful kind—wreck and ruin of the heart. But these evils always give us warnings before they fall on us. Nature never yet broke her pact with any soul, no, nor in these woful things ever took a heart by surprise; nay, she is prodigal of warnings. Nature sends troops of heralds to tell us of the danger first; but the dread last time, the once-too-often of our selfishness or blindness, shuts the record forever. And if by anger or malice or selfishness or neglect we have turned these evils loose to settle on us, how complain we then if they last forever? If you turn love adrift, for example, into storms, to bear what may be, while you sit and nurse yourself in ease, will you murmur then if love freeze, or die hunger-smitten by the wayside, and is dead? If you seek not, or half seek an end, will you sit down childishly and cry because you gain it not? If you have wasted years in riot or in idleness, can you complain, like a whining school-boy, because time will not move backward to make good your truancy? If you have leaped recklessly, or been fool-hardy, will you whimper that you picked not the fruit of wisdom and painstaking? If you have cast away chances by misbehavior, what a thing it is to grumble because the opportunity comes not your way again. Yet the world is full of weak wailings for good things, whose price nevertheless the one who wails simply will not pay, and of complaints at ills whose conditions he who complains makes for himself.

Thus much of the dark things that are in our power. But now, if the dark things in our lot be not in our power, and not our own fault, then it is our part to bear them nobly; and there is no greater nobility than patient and noble enduring. When a trouble cannot be removed, then there is a high way of taking it up, as it were, in our hands and laying it right on our hearts, and pressing it there hard without murmuring. This is the field both of kindness and of religion. It is the field of kindness, for there are many ills in life that, not being our own fault, befall us by

the fault of others. What shall we do with these? Well, we must take them in a kind, forbearing, forgiving, merciful way. Oh I know I am preaching a hard doctrine; but it is heaven's doctrine, it is truth, it is ideal, it is divine living. To murmur savagely, to complain churlishly, is revengeful, and to whimper pettishly is ignoble. "Let us beware," said an old Stoic, "of feeling towards the cruel as they feel towards others," taking any evil in a way that may be as harsh as the injury and more gross. If we are loaded with ills by another's act, let us not burden ourselves more by ill taking of the ill. Nay, I have thought sometimes that there is no great ill, except the bad way in which we take the ill. For, remember this,—if we cannot teach another what is right, or make him wiser than to harm us, that is a good reason for being very meek in ourselves, as a wise Stoic said; and if we cannot cure the ill, there is left the dignity of bearing it quietly; and that is a decoration by God.

And this, again, is the field of religion. For if the ills of our lot are not in our power, and are not the fault of others, then they belong in the order of that mysterious and holy providence which has prepared our way and cleft a path for us, running back far beyond our sight, and forward, and all along the way within his holy counsel. In this we stand on the edge of the solemn, mighty, infinite Law and Order. We cannot tell where the facts of our lot were wrought on the star-forges of the heavens, "what anvils rang, what hammers beat" to shape our destiny; we know not how the holy past in which God worked in his perfection prepared the way for us through myriads of ages, nor can we see how we, held as in the hollow of a hand by that same order, that same infinite mercy, are preparing for others to come. Nay, I said we cannot see how God worked in his perfection; but we cannot see even that there is perfection, for the sweep of view that reveals Divinity is as hard to us, as to see all around a sphere. But we can see that there is blessedness and beauty, we can behold order reigning; even though we have to look through immense reaches of space, and over vast aeons of time to see this order, because it is too grand to be seen in the little events at our feet, which nevertheless are in it. Still, so looking, we *do* see it, a sight of glory and of rapture; and the heavens lying in the lap of it. It has no "shadow of turning,"

no changeableness, no unrest, no shifting, veering, nor swerving, nor shuffling, no pause, no stop, no truce. It is never sorry for anything done, nor in haste to do aught. It is the same Almighty Life, Thought and Power forever and ever and ever, in the beginning, now, and worlds without end. We can see the hands thereof moving in the infinite heavens, we can *not* behold that hand reaching down to pick up the least part of our life and send it going in an order as infinite and heavenly as the starry spaces. Yet so it does. Our joys that hand takes up and sets them in the heavens, if we will but look, if we will but know the hand and know that it takes up our joys into the heavens, where they are like stars shining, beautiful, celestial. And our woes too that hand takes up, our sorrows, our struggles, our failures and our sins, that we may repent and strive again, our losses and our disappointments (and how terrible those may be when we have set our hope very high and very precious), our long toils that seem so unrewarded and never are unrewarded, our daily utter weariness perhaps, when night comes, with our terrible toil. And all the turmoil and wrong and outrage, and faithfulness and desertion and greed and robbery and hardness of heart, all these too that hand takes up; for the power of God is like the atmosphere or the sea, that takes all the earth's smoke and waste, and is not stained. If we see and feel and know of that hand, then we shall gain a new power—

“The insanity of towns to stem,
With simpleness for stratagem.”

We have but to remember that this whole order is God's thinking. In it the heavens swim, and in the heavens the earth sails, and on the earth we are. We therefore are of the earth, which is of the heavens, which are of God's thinking; and in his life and power, then, is our lot held and made. Whatever it be therefore, in the sorrow and pains that are not in our power, let us recall that it floats in the thinking of God, and tread solemnly and piously. To be at peace with things thus, is to be at peace with God.

Therefore let us, who may be scriptures unto each other, beware how we live in this matter, and how we speak. If we have a friend who needs aid and counsel, write not to him that you pray that he be delivered and that the cup pass him by; nay,

but say, "Brother, like the Jews of old who always prayed with their faces toward Jerusalem, I turn myself towards thee now and beseech that strength be given thee, strength, knowledge and courage to say and do the right, which shall make thee at peace with things. I ask not to have thy burden lifted, but for strength and light to see that it is well, and for courage to bear bravely and cheerfully. Oh my brother, I would not dare petition to have burdens taken away. We know not the workings of the Infinite; we are not able to tell the future; even the events of a moment we cannot forecast. How foolish and undevout it is, then, to fret and to be anxious. Let us have faith. I bid thee be of good courage and cheer!" And for ourselves, let us not hedge the influence and import of our wills by murmurs, complaints and moans against the whole order of living things (and all things are living things), nor mutter and sigh and make outcry about things not in our power, but in the Almighty Keeping of God.

Thus I have tried to show the reasonableness of being at peace with things:

Because we should take our lot as one thing, just as the infinite of God brings it to us.

Because so taken we never shall wish to exchange it, since it holds some things too precious to be parted with.

Because we ought to look long and gratefully at these precious things if they are worth more to us than all other things together, until we get light from them to show us our way.

Because many of the ills are our own fault, and we should cure them and not groan about them.

Because of the ills not our own fault, and not in our power, some are made by other persons, and these we are to take with a forbearance like unto God's mercy; and some are inwoven with the unchangeable order of God's laws, and these we are to take with piety, looking up unto his Infinity of Power and his Eternity of Love.

